

Ali Curung/ Warrabri

“What have I let myself in for?” I reflected as I lay awake in the small hours. I could almost see myself from above lying alone in a double bed in an over-large room in a big house in the middle of Australia, with no idea of what was around me, except his vast country. I was sure that I had heard the rhythmic beating of clapsticks somewhere off in the distance. Inside there were rustles and scrapes everywhere, and outside something, or someone, had come up the three wooden steps to the front porch and had not gone down again.

It had been a cold Monday morning in July, just a few days after my twenty seventh birthday, when Bob Romanes, the head of the Victorian YMCA, had rung me at my parent's place in Stanhope and asked if I'd be interested in a job as a recreation officer at an Aboriginal community called Warrabri, in the Northern Territory.

The combination of going somewhere warm, an actual job and an adventure had me saying 'yes' immediately.

“That's good,” he said, “because I've booked your flights for Friday.”

This set in train a few days of madly packing, saying goodbye to friends and family and being ready to fly out.

The heat was the first thing I noticed as I walked across the tarmac after landing at Alice Springs Airport, to be met by the manager of the local YMCA, Rod McGhee. He took me into town and showed me around his facility. If I was expecting any form of training or induction I was mistaken. Rod gave me a ticket for a bus up to Wauchope where I was to be met by the wife of the former recreation officer, Pat Clinton, who would introduce me to the community.

I had an afternoon to kill in Alice so I caught up with some student teachers I'd met on the plane who knew my brother, Greg.

The bus left in the evening so I didn't get to see any scenery.

Pat picked me up at Wauchope at about one O'clock in the morning. She had an Aboriginal boy with her. They drove me to the house that would be mine for the duration. As it was pretty much the first house in the community I didn't get any idea of what was around me. Pat asked if I had any food with me. I said I hadn't as Rod had told me that everything would be sorted. Pat said that she had told Rod to make sure I got some supplies before I left Alice Springs.

I had plenty of time to check the house out because I had decided that I wasn't going anywhere until Pat arrived. I opened the door and found that my mystery visitor was a dog. A dusky red coloured dog who appeared to be very friendly and definitely knew his way around the house. I was happy to have some company.

Pat turned up at around 11 O'clock. I had been a bit impatient and, as I had no food, hungry. Of course she'd been up late picking me up. The dog was named Sparky and he lived at the

house. I'm not sure how that came about but he had been Pat and her husband's dog. As I lived there he was to be mine, though I often felt more like I was his person. If I had to say what his breeding was it would be German Shepherd, dingo cross.

Over the next three days Pat showed me around the community. She told me what programs they had been running and helped me out with supplies. There was a local store but its prices were outrageous and supplies were limited. On the first morning I bought some essentials including some mouse traps and cheese because I had determined what was making the rustling noises. That night I melted cheese onto each of the six traps. Lying in bed was like listening to castanets. I was up and down re-setting traps for much of the night. I caught thirty six mice that night and, although I kept setting traps for a few more nights, I never caught another one.

There was a YMCA building which was a breeze block structure, like many of the buildings, that contained pinball machines and a pool table. It was basically a place to hang out. The pinball machines were coin operated and so part of my job would be to collect the money. This could be used to buy any supplies, such as sporting equipment for programs I might like to run.

The other building I had access to was a hall which was basically a tin shed. It contained video equipment and was used as a cinema. I would charge a dollar for entry and I also ran a canteen. Rod had given me a few videos to show. On that first night I, along with Pat, showed 'Murder On The Orient Express.' This proved to be unpopular as there was very little action and lots of complicated dialogue. Most people in the community spoke a kind of Pidgin English, usually as their third or fourth language. I decided that night that I would only show action movies.

At the end of the three days I drove Pat to Alice Springs to catch her plane back to Melbourne.

The old Isuzu truck only just made it to Alice so Rod supplied me with an even older Land Rover ute. It was supposed to be temporary until they found something better. The scariest thing about the ute was that it had no rear vision mirror. This was bad driving around Alice but OK once I got out on the highway and when I was at the community.

Pat had introduced me to a young Aboriginal man named Murphy who was to work as my assistant. She also told me that there was a big sporting festival at Yuendumu coming up so I should get ready for that. I enlisted Murphy to help me get footy training organised. Murphy sat in the front of the ute with Sparky riding in the back. We drove around the red dirt roads of the community and we saw a young bloke walking along, dirty jeans and shirt, bare feet kicking up small clouds of red dust. Murphy said "him." I pulled up alongside and said that training was on, offering him a lift. He told me he'd walk. The next bloke, sitting on a verandah half asleep did the same. After the third bloke refused a lift I asked Murphy why. He told me that they were scared of my dog. "That's easily fixed." I told him and got Sparky to ride in the footwell at Murphy's feet. He sat there petrified, but the other team members were happy to get a lift.

I was told that the name of the community was Warrabri, but the locals called it Ali Curung which is a Kaiditch term meaning Country of Dogs or Dog Dreaming Country. Basically this means that dogs were the sacred animal of the area and no one was to harm them.

The footy ground was a red dirt oval. Most of the team had no boots but played barefoot. I tried to set up some drills but they weren't interested. They just wanted to play a game. I was happy with this. They asked me to play, and umpire. We played a game of 'shirts and skins.' I was on the 'skins' team, meaning that I played without a shirt. I was quite possibly the fittest on the ground but definitely far from the most athletic. Suddenly these guys went from disinterested and shuffling to sprints, long kicks, high marks. Some of the most spectacular footy I'd ever seen. Despite being fit and strong I was so white compared with my teammates that I felt very fragile.

The night of the first footy training a band from Elcho Island played at the local park. I ran a canteen for a while and then danced with a couple of young women, white, who were visiting Ali Curung as community workers. We were the only men and women dancing together, The Aboriginal men danced with each other, as did the women.

When the last song was announced all of the Aboriginal people left. This was a trait I'd noticed at my previous job which was managing a pool in Murgon in Queensland where there had been a large indigenous population. As soon as they realise that something is about to finish they get up and leave.

This left just a few of us white people dancing and hoping to get ourselves an encore.

One of the first things I learned about Aboriginal culture was the use of the word 'Kumanjayi.' This was a substitute name for a dead person's name. For example, someone named John had died not long before I had arrived so the people should really have called me Kumanjayi, but, as I was white, they settled for JH. I was amazed and mystified when I knew that a few people in a group would go by Kumanjayi but if someone called to them, 'Hey Kumanjayi' the right one would respond.

Once I told a group of kids that the movie I was to show that night starred John Wayne. Another kid hadn't heard and asked who the star was. He was told 'Kumunjayi Kumanjayi.' He responded 'I love his movies.'

It didn't take me long to realise that, not only were most of the people scared of Sparky, he was also the top dog in the community. Most of the time other dogs avoided him but occasionally one would try his luck. I have never seen a dog fight like Sparky. Most dog fights consist of a lot of growling and snapping. Sparky was different. He was mostly silent and strategic. It's hard to describe but it was like watching a master boxer fighting a street fighter. He would inflict damage whilst ducking and dodging away from any attacks. The fights didn't last long but there was nothing I could do to stop it. Sparky is long gone but given his influence there would be plenty of his descendants running around.

I started running after school programs. I made one stipulation about attendance. The kids had to have been at school that day. I didn't have to worry about taking a role or anything, if someone who had not been at school turned up the other kids would dob.

I quickly found that formalised activities just wouldn't work. The best thing to do was to set up some gear and let the kids play.

One of the best activities was the water slide. A sheet of plastic and a hose. The kids would line up, run and slide. It was cool and fun. All I had to do was hold the hose. Any adult who came within range quickly learned that they'd get wet. Plenty of people, mostly whites, would deliberately come close.

I tried sliding once and, because I was bigger than the kids, I slid off the end of the plastic onto the grass. There was some bug or something in that grass that left me with bites or welts that were very itchy and lasted for days. The kids were never bothered by this.

Another thing that was in the grass was bindiis. They were so bad that once one of my thongs broke while I was out bush and I couldn't walk one step without getting a lethal thorn on my foot. I had to drag the broken thong along with my foot. The Aboriginal people were not bothered by the bindiis. Once I felt a baby's foot and found it to be leathery like a dog's paw, human feet should naturally be like this.

The Yuendumu sports weekend came around very quickly. I had been training the footy team most days. They played a really entertaining and fun style but didn't really get the idea of defence. I tried to convince them that some defensive moves would improve their game but to no avail.

I shared the driving of a minibus with a lady named Pat. We were taking women and children on the 400 km journey across the outback. We drove south along the Sturt Highway, stopping at Ti Tree for a break. I noticed that anything anyone bought at the roadhouse there was shared amongst the group.

The bus was an eighteen seater, the largest that can legally be driven with a car licence. Just because it was registered to carry eighteen didn't mean that was all we carried. I did a rough count and got thirty five women and children.

After Ti Tree we turned off the highway and went along dirt roads. The first time I stopped at a gate I asked one of the kids to open and close it. When he'd closed it I drove away from him, making him run after the bus. The whole bus erupted in laughter. At the next gate I asked for a volunteer. Hands shot up me, me, me.. Was the call. I chose one. Gate was closed, I drove away, the kid ran, the bus laughed. This happened 20 to 30 times and each time was as funny as the last.

Every now and then we would come to a fork in the road and I found that I could ask anyone, kids included, which direction to take. They all seemed to know, even though they were 300 kms from home. In some cases they would tell me that both roads would work, which was shorter but rougher and which was best to take.

The country throughout that area was not really desert but red dirt scrubland with lots of tall termite mounds, those ingenious structures that are built to avoid the hottest sun and act like natural air conditioning units.

The last part of the trip was very hard driving as it was due west into the setting sun along a corrugated road.

When we arrived at Yuendumu we were directed to a camping area that had a few derelict buildings. The women thought it was wonderful because they weren't completely out in the open. The men, who had been travelling in the back of a cattle truck, were directed elsewhere, not so luxurious. I believe that the women and children joined them the next day.

Most of the communities had a recreation officer, like myself, employed by the YMCA. Peter, the local YMCA bloke, put us up at his place.

There were big mobs of people at Yuendumu. The celebrity sportsman was Syd Jackson, who had been a champion player for Carlton. The whole event seemed to be very well organised. There were a couple of red dirt footy grounds where matches were held. There was also netball, basketball and softball.

I was mostly involved with the footy and the team asked me to play. I wasn't great at footy but was tempted. I refused because I didn't feel like I was part of the community, instead I acted as coach and did goal umpiring.

Ali Curung, wearing their white jumpers with a blue Kangaroo emblem emblazoned across the front, played one match on the first day and had a good win against Areyonga.

As with any footy game the goal umpires were responsible for scoring. We would get together at half time and at the end of the game, compare notes and take them to the results table which was situated on a large tractor trailer between the ovals.

On the second day Ali Curung played against Yirara, which was an outback college. I was goal umpiring. Towards the end of the match we were leading by a couple of points when a Yirara player took a mark just too far out to score. I was on the goal line and tried to tell my players to punch the ball through. I could have easily done it from where I was standing. Of course defence wasn't how they played the game. Everyone went for the big mark. A Yirara player marked the ball and subsequently goaled, giving them the lead and the win.

It was Saturday night and a few events were organised, including a women's corroboree and a battle of the bands. The stage was the same trailer that had been used for gathering the footy results. The bands were all from various communities and were incredibly good.

As recreation officers it fell to us to work out who was in the finals and to sort out a timetable. We soon realised that we only had half the scoresheets. We realised that, when they moved the trailer so it could be used as the stage, the tractor was just driven away with the paperwork still on the table. Of course it all blew away so we were out late at night with torches looking for score sheets. Of course we couldn't find them. Back at Peter's place we talked through who had won which games. We had it all right except we weren't sure whether Ali Curung or Yirara should be in fourth place. I conceded that it should be Yirara as they had beaten Ali Curung.

Sunday was an athletics day, Unlike the other sports it wasn't very well organised, there was a bit of spear throwing and some running events. The big race was called a marathon but was really only about 5 kms. The guest athlete was a guy who was an accomplished marathon runner. He had recently won the Alice Springs marathon.

Peter and I decided to enter the race but agreed to run at the back of the field. This lasted for perhaps a kilometre before I decided it was just too slow so we picked up the pace. I was fitter than Peter and soon left him behind. I passed all the other runners but couldn't catch up with the marathon guy. The officials counted me as being attached to a community so I was awarded first place as the other bloke was an outsider. This gave points to Ali Curung which I was happy about but I have always wondered if I could have beaten that other bloke if I'd been trying from the start.

The next day was scheduled as the finals day and, as Ali Curung didn't have any teams in the finals, Pat and I asked the women if they would like to go home in the morning. They said they would and we agreed to pick them up at 9.00.

We pulled up in front of the group of women and children at the appointed time. Just as we got moving I heard a voice from the back seats saying 'My son, he not here.' so went spent time looking for the boy. Next a woman said 'I got a boil and it been paining me all night, need to go to the health centre.' This kind of thing went on and on until after a couple of hours driving around I put it to them that they didn't really want to go but would rather stay and watch the finals. That's what I wanted to do so we stayed. I understood then that they would not say 'no' to a white man, something I would be more aware of after that.

We stayed for the finals. The two biggest communities were Largemanu and Yuendumu and, as expected, they played off in the Grand Final. Yuendumu won much to the delight of the community. The footy was fantastic. It was all long runs, lots of bounces and high marks, extremely athletic and fun to watch.

The next morning we met the women and children. They all got on the bus and we headed home without any incidents. At Ti Tree Roadhouse nobody even went into the store as no one had any money.

It didn't take long to settle into a routine. Not much happened in the mornings so I usually went for an early morning run, the only time it was cool enough. Dogs were a problem if I ran around the community so I often ran on the airfield or on the road out of town. If I did run around the town I had to take Sparky with me for protection. He was usually great for this, though, one time six dogs attacked him. He was holding his own but the numbers were overwhelming so I grabbed a stick and helped him out. Another time I got to the turnaround point when one of the tradies stopped for a yarn. I didn't notice Sparky jump into the back of his ute. I had to walk home.

After the run was a slow breakfast. I would drop in to the office building to check for mail or calls from home then get to the school in time to catch up with the kids about the after school program and to join the teachers for morning tea. Usually I would get the gear needed for the after school program.

After lunch I'd go to the YMCA games room to see what was happening there. Sometimes I'd find an activity for the men to do as they tended to take over that building, perhaps a kick of the footy or show a movie. Sometimes I would go with the women and children looking for bush tucker.

In the evening we would play sports like volleyball or I'd show a movie.

Sparky came with me to movie nights a couple of times before I realised that he was a disruption because the locals were scared of him and he'd get into fights with other dogs. The amazing thing was I could tell him to stay and he would stay at home. I think he took the role of guard dog when I was away from the house, which was pretty handy.

I would charge admission to the movies. People would pay and go inside. It was paper money in those days and we still had one and two dollar notes. They would be pulled out of dirty pockets, all scrunched up and would sit in a pile of crumpled paper in my till. There would always be a bunch of kids sitting in the foyer when all the adults had gone inside. Once everyone was settled an old bloke, an elder, would come out and say 'you,' you' you...' pointing to several of the kids, he'd then pay for them and they'd go inside. Another elder would then come out 'you, you, you,.....' this would keep happening until all the kids were in.

I gained another assistant, Harrison, who helped me with movies and such.

The people would sense that a movie was ending so they would get up and leave, usually before the denouement. I would serve treats from a canteen and then usually watch some of the movie from the back of the 'cinema'.

Planet Of The Apes got to the final scene where Charlton Heston is on his knees with his hand on the red button threatening the leader of the apes with blowing up the world and.. Everyone gets up and leaves... I'm standing on tiptoe trying to see what happens.

When they've all gone I ask Harrison why they do that. He's been in jail and has had more experience with white culture. He replies that he doesn't know. "Not to worry." I say. "It's a video, we can rewind it." So we sat and watched the end of the movie. I can't remember if he pressed the button or not.

Harrison had been in jail for rape and one night nearly got me in big trouble as he asked if I could take him for a drive promising to show me something. We didn't get far when he told me to pull over. We got out of the car and I realised very quickly that he'd brought me to a women's camp. I knew straight away that we shouldn't be there and told him we were going. Fortunately he came with me. The next day I was asked to meet with the elders. This was a scary thing to happen as I'd heard about tribal justice practices. They listened to my side of the story and understood that it wasn't my doing and that I'd avoided a bad situation. Whew.

Even though I was only at the women's camp for moments I got to see how they were all together. I was living by myself which usually felt quite good but when I left the camp I felt really lonely.

The other main contact I had was Rosalie. She was a thirteen year old girl who had a crush on me. This too was scary but she became a link with the kids and she kept me informed of what was going on.

Rosalie gave me a skin name. All the people there have skin names which serve as a way of knowing relationships within the tribe. The name she gave me was Tjagamarra. This happened to be her marrying skin. Her skin name was Ngapaljarri. She told me how I was related to the rest of the skin names. I didn't take it seriously but others in the tribe accepted it and I had people say things like, "Hey, I'm your brother." Since then I've regarded it as an honour.

If I wanted to organise anything with the kids Rosalie was my contact. I didn't look for her, she would find me. Several times I took the kids to a swimming hole. I could never find my way. Rosalie would sit beside me in my landrover and would hold one hand in her lap, pointing forward. If we needed to change direction she would move her hand. I'd be trying to keep the car on the road and watch her directions at the same time. If I didn't see her hand move and kept driving straight the kids would laugh at me.

Once she came to me to tell me that we couldn't go to the swimming hole because "those old men, they say there debil debil there." But she said we could go to Kumanjayi Well. I asked which well she meant. She couldn't say. Finally she whispered that it was Boney Well.

The Ali Curung community was made up of four different tribes, each with its own language. Everyone seemed to be able to speak all four plus English. I asked Murphy the word for dog in each language. The words were not at all similar. Usually these groups got on well but sometimes the young men went on the warpath. Mostly it was pretty harmless. Coming home from the movies carrying my money till I could see utes driving around with groups of young men in the back carrying waddies and clubs. One came close to me and I heard one say "YMCA bloke." They left me alone. I was on the opposite side of a large fenced off compound from my house. I thought that someone might realise I was carrying money which might cause some problems so I called Sparky. He ran around the compound and walked back with me. I saw several utes approach but each one swerved away when they saw us.

One of the Aboriginal blokes pointed to a number written on a shed wall. I'd been trying for days to contact the coach of a team in Tennant Creek to arrange a game of footy.

Most of the team travelled in the back of the cattle truck. I joined some of the others in the back of a ute.

The game was absolute chaos. I umpired along with one of the blokes from the community. I could see that spectators had got hold of some grog and they were somehow getting it to my fellow umpire. His decisions got more and more erratic as the game went on and I just had to overrule him.

About thirty of us made the trip to Tennant Creek. Only three of us came back. The rest had got on the grog.

Ali Curung was a dry community. This meant that only people with a permit were allowed to drink. To qualify for a permit you basically had to be white. This was not racist, it was the council of elders who controlled this system and they knew the problems associated with alcohol. You could only drink in the residence of a permit holder. This meant that the only place to drink outdoors was the compound where the teachers' flats were. We often had barbecues there.

Punishment for breaking the drinking rules was quite harsh. For example if someone without a permit brought grog into the community the vehicle they used could be confiscated.

My experience with the footy game at Tennant Creek gave me a good understanding of the problems that came with access to grog. I wouldn't be doing that again.

The white community was pretty small and welcoming to any newcomer, Everyone was a newcomer. Consequently the social life was quite good. We regularly had barbecues or dinner parties or movie nights.

Russell came up to visit. He was only sixteen and had to make the same trip as me which had been pretty challenging for me as a 27 year old.

We had decided to paint the YMCA building. Some of the blokes found us some paint. It was all sorts of bright colours. I wouldn't have chosen them but was happy to go along. On the day we were to do the painting a group of them were waiting outside my door. Russ and I went along and we all got stuck in. It didn't last long. By the afternoon only Russ and I remained painting. Between us we got the job done.

I took Russ to Alice Springs. I don't think we knew it was happening but Henley On Todd was on that weekend so we got to watch one of Australia's most famous events.

It was a lot of fun to watch. The highlight being the race between the locals and the military from the US base situated just outside Alice. Of course the Americans were much fitter and better organised so they won the race, which was called the Australia's Cup. There was a protest. The Americans had been found to be cheating. Some piece of equipment on their boat was deemed to be illegal.

We also spent some time in our motel room watching footy. Essendon beat Carlton in the last match of the season. It was Kevin Sheedy's third year as coach and, despite Carlton winning the previous two premierships, Essendon had beaten them every time they met. The Bombers had been eliminated in the first week of the finals in those years. This time they were playing Carlton again in the first final. We knew they could beat them.

I put Russell on a plane and headed back.

Part of my employment package was a four day weekend in Alice Springs with accommodation paid for. I would get into town on Friday evening and go to my boss's house to hand in any receipts and collect videos for my movie nights. Even though I was a young

man working by myself in a remote location and had just driven 200 kms, I never got past his front porch, I was never even offered a cup of tea.

When I got the message that Rod wanted me to call him I had no idea what it was about because he hadn't shown much interest in my work. He asked me to write a report on what I was doing in the community. I wrote what was basically a quick, handwritten note outlining the programs and activities that I was running.

What he didn't tell me was that the Northern Territory Government was trying to make communities self managed and was taking funding from whatever programs they thought they could dispense with. Consequently my job was under threat. If I'd known this I would have written a much more detailed report, explaining how my programs helped with cutting truancy at the school, kept young men in the community instead of going off and drinking, etc etc. I could have argued that mine was the most important job as I helped the school, the health workers and the police, however it was not to be.

Just as we were in negotiations about our funding I got a job offer back in Melbourne as a shift manager at Nunawading Pool. The assistant manager had kept my information from when I'd self funded a pool operator's course earlier in the year. I don't think he'd any idea that the number my parents had given him was in the Northern Territory.

I accepted the job.

I spent my last evening at the teacher's house. I had taken Sparky around to a friend's house so they could look after him but he had jumped the fence and come back to my house so I'd taken him with me and told him to stay at the foot of the stairs. After a while he nosed the door open, crossed the room and lay at my feet. Then he put his head in my lap and eventually climbed up into my lap. It was an incredible feeling having his wild, tough dog knowing that I was leaving and showing me that he didn't want me to go.

I was given a carved wooden snake and a hunting boomerang. They didn't fit in my bag when I was packing and I'd decided to carry them separately but somehow forgot them until I was halfway to Alice Springs.

When Essendon had won the preliminary final I'd had no idea that the next week I'd be in Melbourne on Grand Final day.

Waiting in line at Alice Springs airport I overheard some guys talking about going to the game, I casually asked if they had spare tickets, they told me to catch up with them at Adelaide airport as they thought they might. I bought three tickets to the game and rang my mate, Wayne and Mum and Dad asking to get Russell on the bus.

In 24 hours I went from the heat and remoteness of central Australia to a cold MCG with 100,000 supporters chanting 'We're with you Australia 2.'

I feel privileged to have spent some time in that part of Australia with indigenous people. I feel that I gained some understanding of how they live and how different they are from us. I often think of human society as just one big evolving experiment. Aboriginal people, because

they were so isolated from the rest of the world, developed a completely different way of looking at life. Much of this was taken away with European settlement and is, unfortunately, impossible to be re-established.